THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICE
CLEVELAND, OHIO 44106
TELEPHONE (216) 421-7340

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ANAMORPHOSES: GAMES OF
PERCEPTION AND ILLUSION
IN ART

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What you see will not be what you get, at least not at first glance when the exhibition, Anamorphoses: Games of Perception and Illusion in Art opens at The Cleveland Museum of Art, March 30.

Scheduled to run through May 15, the exhibition consists of works of art that contain a visual sleight of hand in which artists deliberately distort scenes that become recognizable only when viewed from a certain angle, or through a peep hole, or with the aid of a specially shaped mirror. This particular type of perspective distortion art takes its name from the Greek, ana--again and morphe--shape.

The first known examples of anamorphic art are in Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks, as studies in his search for new techniques in perspective drawing. Since then in every century there have been painters who have experimented in these visual games with subjects that have ranged from religion to pornography.

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The exhibition, made possible by a grant from the SCM Corporation, was organized by two Dutchmen, Joost Elffers and Michael Schuyt, who have gathered anamorphic paintings from Paris, New York, Amsterdam, Rome, Brussels, and London. Much of Elffer's and Schuyt's work is based on that of French art historian Jurgis Baltrusaitis. Dr. Baltrusaitis, whose pioneering research on anamorphosis was first published in 1955 and will be available in English translation soon, gave assistance to the show's two organizers.

When the exhibition opened at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum earlier this year, an unprecedented 123,000 visitors came to puzzle out the pictures hidden in anamorphic paintings. The more than 100 original works are supplemented by copies of the unborrowable.

Perhaps the most outstanding perspective anamorphosis is Hans Holbein the Younger's 1533 painting "The Ambassadors." The original hangs in the National Gallery, London, but a life-size color reproduction is in the show. The painting is a clear realistic double portrait, with one exception: an elongated blurred form in the foreground. Viewed from the correct angle the blur becomes a skull. Another perspective anamorphosis, a portrait of Edward VI, is a pointy-nosed curiosity until viewed through a hole on the side of the frame.

Other pieces of anamorphic art require a reflecting device, an anamorphoscope such as a cylinder, cone, or pyramid-shaped mirror. A distorted design painted on the flat surface changes back to realistic images when viewed in the reflecting surface of a cylinder as in Salvador Dali's two lithographs.

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One of the greatest exponents of anamorphic art was Samuel Hoogstraten, who worked in Delft in the 1600's. Hoogstraten specialized in peep shows made to entertain, while other artists, like Holbein, used anamorphosis to achieve a mystical effect.

Whole rooms can come under the magic spell of anamorphosis. A full-sized copy of the only surviving large-scale anamorphosis from the monastery of the Minims in Rome, the 1642 "St. Francis of Paola" by Emmanuel Maignan, is either incomprehensible or crystal clear, depending on where you stand. Contemporary Amsterdam artist Jan Beutener has constructed an anamorphic room especially for this exhibition. A jumble of half-assembled incomplete objects, it becomes a normal appearing room when viewed through a peep hole.

Admission to the exhibition, which is installed in the Museum's upper special exhibition gallery, is 50 cents per person. Children under 16 who are accompanied by an adult, groups scheduled through the Education Department, and Museum members will be admitted free.

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For additional information or photographs, please contact David Patterson or Ann Edwards, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.